FLORIDA AVENUE
(Boundary Street)
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-700

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602-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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HABS DC WASH, 601-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

FLORIDA AVENUE
(Boundary Street)

HABS No. DC-700

Location: This avenue heads northeast from Massachusetts Avenue near 22nd Street along an escarpment to its northernmost point at Eleventh Street. It then turns sharply southeast to Ninth Street where it continues in a straight line at about 120 degrees southeast to 15th Street, NE.

Owner/Manager: The right-of-way spanning from building line to building line is the property of the U.S. government while the paved roadways, sidewalks and the planted strips between are under the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia Department of Public Works. Most of the smaller reservations are maintained by the National Park Service, but a few are managed by the District of Columbia.

Present Use: The straight segment from Ninth Street, NW, to 15th Street, NE, supports heavy commuter and local traffic, while the winding segment in the northwest quadrant is less travelled.

Significance: Neither L'Enfant nor Ellicott indicated that an avenue was to follow the city boundary. This avenue developed, nevertheless along the outer edge of the planned city squares. Known as Boundary Street until 1893 when it was renamed Florida Avenue, this road follows the path of a natural escarpment. Today it forms the north boundary of the Dupont Circle and Striver's Section National Historic Districts.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792, Ellicott Plan.

B. Historical Context:

The plans of both Pierre L'Enfant and Andrew Ellicott delineate only the city squares; the streets and avenues are merely defined as the open spaces in between. These blocks extend north to an irregular line, determined largely by topography, that came to be called Boundary Street. This northern border begins at Rock Creek (named Pine Creek on L'Enfant's plan) and continues northeast along the curve of a natural escarpment from 23rd to Eleventh Street. At Eleventh Street, the northernmost point of the historic city, the boundary line angles sharply southward to a branch of the Tiber Creek (at today's Eighth Street). From here, this line straightens and continues southeast at roughly 120 degrees to today's 15th Street, NE.

On his plan, L'Enfant indicated special landscape features at each instance where an avenue crossed or terminated at the city boundary, envisioning these spaces as symbolic portals into the capital. With dotted lines, he implied that the paths of New Hampshire, Vermont, Delaware, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New York, and Maryland avenues were to be extended beyond the boundary. At the points where Massachusetts and Delaware avenues cross the boundary are large open triangles, while New York and New Jersey avenues crossed the boundary at a widening in a branch of the Tiber River. Between and parallel to New York and Maryland avenues, L'Enfant indicated another avenue extending beyond the city limits and labelled the dotted-line extension as the "New Road to Bladensburg." At the intersection of Maryland Avenue, the southernmost point of today's Florida Avenue, the boundary turns due south along 15th Street at a site indicated with dotted lines as a circle.

With regard to the city boundary, Ellicott copied L'Enfant's plan almost identically but eliminated the dotted lines that indicated the continuation of the avenues, as well as the avenue between and parallel to Maryland and New York avenues. Since the avenue marked the original boundary of the city of Washington, the area beyond was called the County of Washington, District of Columbia. While streets planned within the city carved large tracts of land into small, city squares, the land beyond was developed by some of Washington's wealthiest citizens into large, country estates.

As early as 1791, one of the city's three commissioners, Maj. Gustavus Scott, purchased a large tract near the intersection of R and 21st streets from Anthony Holmead, one of the city's original proprietors, and occupied the brick house called Rock Hill that had stood on the site since the 1750s. Holmead built another home adjacent to the property on what today would be the north side of S Street between 22nd and 23rd streets.[1] When American diplomat and author Joel Barlow purchased Rock Hill in 1807, he commissioned Benjamin Henry Latrobe to create the Neoclassical estate he named Kalorama, a Greek word lauding the magnificent view from the property. The estate soon became an elegant gathering place in the country. Reputedly, when Robert Fulton spent time at Kalorama, he performed experiments in Rock Creek toward the development of a submarine.[2]

Northeast of Kalorama in the heights at the north end of 16th Street was another early estate. Before the city was founded, the Peter family owned a large farm encompassing land on both sides of the new boundary.[3] Called Mount Pleasant, about 150 acres of the tract was sold to Com. David Porter in 1811. In 1816, Porter commissioned George Hadfield to build a mansion on the estate he called Meridian Hill, since it was directly north of the White House on a line envisioned by some Washingtonians as a new world meridian. Like Kalorama Meridian Hill was a place for entertainment and resort for Washington's elite.

Around the same time, North Carolina Congressman Joseph Pearson and his new wife, Eleanor Brent, hired Latrobe to design a stately home on their 200-acre tract just beyond the boundary due north of the Capitol. With vistas of the Capitol and the Anacostia River, Brentwood came to be known as one of the grandest estates in the District of Columbia.[4]

Between Brentwood and Meridian Hill, artist and engraver William James Stone purchased a 122-acre tract where he built Mount Pleasant in 1840, and in 1850, Amos Kendall, postmaster general and political advisor to Andrew Jackson, built a home on a 103-acre plot southeast of Brentwood.[5] A philanthropist, Kendall took in five abandoned deaf and mute children and began a grammar school. By 1858 he had eighteen students, and by 1864 the school was granted a charter as a four-year college.[6]

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[1] Eberlein and Hubbard, 439.

[2] Eberlein and Hubbard, 439-45.

[3] McNeil, 41-43.

[4] Goode 34-35; Eberlein and Hubbard, 457-64.

[5] Goode, 36-37.

[6] Goode, 47-48.

The Boschke Map compiled between 1857-61 clearly shows the large estates and farms distributed north of the boundary. Kendall's property, labelled Kendall Green, appears to be subdivided into small lots each with several small buildings. Seven of the city's streets appear to continue beyond the boundary, the most developed of these being Seventh Street. A forested area east of Seventh Street is labelled as John A. Smith's park, and to the south, a large building is labeled as the Park Hotel. Another road extending north of the avenue from North Capitol Street leads to Greenwood Cemetery, a half mile from the boundary. Since early Washington laws prohibited cemeteries within the city, there were numerous burial grounds just beyond the boundary. The railroad tracks from Baltimore crossed over the avenue near Fifth Street, NE, and at 15th Street, NE, travelers riding beyond the boundary would have had to stop and pay a toll to use the roads to Bladensburg and Baltimore.

When the war broke out, the city was protected by a ring of forts erected in the heights surrounding the city, and several of the large estates outside of Florida Avenue were used by the federal government in the war effort. The estate at Mount Pleasant was used as hospital for Union troops, while at Kalorama troops drilled on the grounds, and smallpox victims were quarantined inside the house.[7]

At the end of the war, Washington was in disarray. The conflict had attracted soldiers, bureaucrats, and freed slaves from the south, while westward expansion brought industrialists and businessmen who had made fortunes in mining, railroads, and other growing industries in the expanding nation. As the population increased and the city grew, the federal government finally began to invest in the improvement of the city.

The aftermath of the Civil War vastly changed the character of Florida Avenue. Responsibility for improving the city's public property was assigned to the Army Corps of Engineers Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G) in 1867, and during his second year as the head of the OPB&G, Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Michler described his plans to improve the avenue:

> Boundary street, towards which many of [the avenues] lead, forms a connecting link between them, and skirts the environs of the city. It is capable of great embellishment; by increasing the width and planting along it rows of shade trees, it will become a most delightful and much frequented drive.[8]

Although the OPB&G began improving the city in earnest, in 1871 Congress installed a territorial government and the local Board of Public Works took over responsibility for upgrading the streets and avenues. Although the government was disbanded in 1874, during its three years in place, miles of roads were paved, trees were planted, and gas and sewer lines were laid. At least eight streets and avenues in the northwest quadrant were fully improved up to the boundary, encouraging development of land to and beyond the old city limits. By 1887 a 45' roadway had been paved within the 80' right-of-way of Boundary Street.

As these improvements were made, the city population began to spread out

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[7] Eberlein and Hubbard, 444.

[8] Annual Report . . ., 1868, 14.

from the central core to the less congested suburbs. Speculators purchased the large estates north of the boundary, subdivided them, and erected homes. After the experimental local government fell, the city commissioners who took over the job voiced a growing concern over the fact that roadways were laid at whim within these subdivisions such that they did not meet or correspond with L'Enfant's street system.

One of the earliest subdivisions was formed on John Smith's land. He sold his 150-acre farm north of Florida Avenue at Seventh Street to Howard University, founded soon after the war by several Union generals who wanted to provide education for the newly freed slaves who flocked to Washington. The university only retained twenty acres of the tract and subdivided the rest for buildings lots at a tremendous profit.[9] Amzi Lorenzo Barber, who came to Washington in 1868 to serve as chairman of the university's education department, left several years later to pursue a real estate and development career. His first venture was to develop part of the original university tract into the city's first planned suburb. Called LeDroit Park, the neighborhood was located north of the avenue between Third and Sixth streets, NW. Soon thereafter, in 1881, Barber and several partners purchased the William Stone estate at Mount Pleasant and began developing the Columbia Heights neighborhood. Barber built his own home, called Belmont, north of the avenue at 13th Street where he enjoyed views of the entire city.[10] The estates at Kalorama and Meridian Hill met similar fates. Destroyed by fire in 1865, Kalorama was completely rebuilt in the 1870s, but was demolished in 1889 when the property surrounding it was subdivided for suburban development.[11] Meridian Hill burned down in 1863, and the land was subdivided in 1869. The region was still relatively rural, however, "Poet of the Sierras" Joaquin Miller built his log cabin amid the oak trees in 1883.[12]

One of the most memorable buildings constructed at Meridian Hill was Henderson's Castle. Built by Missouri lawyer and politician John Brooks Henderson, the castellated Victorian home faced south onto Florida Avenue. At the time the mansion was built, it was surrounded by the small wood shacks occupied by freed slaves, many of whom were denied property within the original city. Henderson's wife, in an effort to make her address a more prominent one, purchased lots along 16th Street and built speculative mansions to attract well-heeled neighbors. To embellish this "Avenue of the Presidents," as she thought 16th Street should be named, Mrs. Henderson convinced the OPB&G to purchase a large tract of land along 16th Street between Florida Avenue and Euclid Street for a large park. Meridian Hill Park was developed over the first three decades of the twentieth century into an elaborate Italianate garden with a grand cascade and numerous statues.

As the large estates were broken down, the District commissioners lobbied to enact a street plan that would enforce the extension of streets beyond the boundary on the axes of L'Enfant's thoroughfares. As the streets and avenues

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[9] Goode, 886-87.

[10] Goode, 97.

[11] Eberlein and Hubbard, 44-45.

[12] Commission of Fine Arts, 324-25.

stretched into the suburbs, Boundary Street lost its distinction as a legal border. City Commissioner Richard Hoxie pointed out in 1889:

> The highway which encircles the city proper on the north, known as Boundary Street, and which extends from 15th Street east to 22nd Street west, is the old boundary of the city. This street is in the shape of a sickle with a handle. The name is objectionable because it conveys the impression that with this street the city or the district ends, whereas in fact the city has extended beyond this street and a large portion lies beyond it. There are two parts of Boundary Street where the numbers of the houses are the same, due to the crookedness of the portion lying between Ninth and 22nd streets west and this duplication of numbers causes great annoyance and repeated complaints."

Hoxie proposed dividing the street into three portions and giving each segment a different name: the straight portion between 15th and Ninth streets, the blocks between Ninth and Tenth streets, and the portion between Tenth and 22nd streets.[13] Although the street was never divided into these segments, the name of the road was officially changed from Boundary Street to Florida Avenue in 1893.

With the help of Mrs. Henderson and the general beauty of the vicinity, the region beyond the northwestern section of Florida Avenue was built with elegant upper-class homes and became known as Kalorama in honor of the long-gone estate. East of 16th Street, the homes facing the south side of the avenue were smaller, middle-class brick rowhouses in the proximity of Howard University.

As the avenue was improved, the OPB&G landscaped the small reservations at the angular street intersections. Triangular areas formed where the avenue intersected with the grid streets were sodded and surrounded with cast-iron post-and-chain fences. In 1900, an elegant traffic circle was formed at the intersection of the avenue with North Capitol Street. Called Truxton Circle in honor of Revolutionary War hero Commodore Thomas Truxton, the landscaped park featured flowerbeds, shrubs, and a fountain.

Farther south, the character of the avenue was largely affected by the events of the first decades of the twentieth century. Union Station, completed in 1908, successfully consolidated all of the rail lines in the city. The tracks leading to the station from the northeast crossed over Florida Avenue at Delaware Avenue near the Brentwood estate. New York Avenue, which crossed Florida Avenue north of Brentwood, became a heavily travelled route to Baltimore and in the vicinity of Florida Avenue developed into a warehouse district. As the area became more industrialized, Brentwood was gradually destroyed by neglect. After it was finally consumed by fire in 1917, part of the grounds were used as a rail yard, and at the outbreak of World War I troops trained on the part of the estate that was converted into Camp Miegs.

South of this industrial portion of the avenue, Kendall Green continued to expand. Renamed Gallaudet College after its first instructor, the campus grew to encompass all of the north side of the avenue between Sixth and Tenth streets, NE. Small rowhouses on the south side of the avenue filled in throughout the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century.

Although the Kalorama neighborhood has remained largely residential,

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[13] Hoxie, 261.

much of the area between Gallaudet College and Howard University had become a commercial area filled with small stores, service stations, used-car lots, and other small businesses. Many of the triangular parks have been pared away to ease traffic flow, or have been neglected. Truxton Circle was entirely eliminated in 1947. Although the "comely thatch of shrubs surrounding a fountain may have been a joy to the casual sightseer," as a contemporary newspaper reported, "it was a pain in the neck to traffic officials."[14]

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Overall dimensions:

1. Width: From building line to building line, the avenue is 80' wide.

2. Length within city limits: Within the historic city boundary, this avenue is approximately 4.7 miles long.

B. Elements within right-of-way:

1. Roadway: East of 15th Street, NW, the avenue supports two lanes of traffic each way. Traffic in the block south of Meridian Hill Park between 15th and 16th streets, NW, travels one-way going east. West of 16th Street, the roadway is narrower, supporting only one lane in each direction.

2. Sidewalks and street trees: Sidewalks run the full length of the area between the roadway and building lines. Tree cuts in the sidewalks near the curb are planted sporadically with street trees of varying sizes. This strip also includes highway lamps and traffic signs and signals.

3. Large reservations: Since the elimination of Truxton Circle at North Capitol Street, the avenue features no large reservations in the right of way. Meridian Hill Park, Reservation No. 327, is located on the north side of the avenue between 15th and 16th streets, NW (See HABS No. DC-532).

4. Small reservations: The following list describes the location of each reservation identified along this avenue by 1894, the date it was first recognized as federal property, the date of transfer, the date of first improvement (if known), and a description of its appearance historically and as of summer 1990. Unless otherwise noted, the small triangles are under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service (NPS).

   a. Reservation No. 57D: East of the avenue, west of 22nd Street, north of P Street, NW, (2,101 square feet). This large triangle is numbered with the reservations on Massachusetts Avenue, but it is located at the southwest end of Florida Avenue just as the avenue blends into 23rd Street, NW. This reservation was transferred to the U.S. government November 16, 1906. September 13, 1916, it was approved as the site for a monument to honor Ukrainian poet Taras

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[14] "Truxton Circle Road Block Doomed by New Traffic Plan," Washington Star, March 24, 1947.

Shevchenko. The monument includes a 14'-tall bronze statue of the poet and a 10'-tall slab inscribed with a relief of the Greek god Prometheus as well as some of Shevchenko's writings, and it was dedicated June 27, 1964.

b. Reservation No. 270: South of the avenue, west of 21st Street, NW, (202 square feet). This sodded triangle abuts City Square No. 65. Surrounded by concrete perimeter walks, the reservation is fenced in with the abutting property. It features well-tended shrubs, an ornamental tree, and a "U.S." reservation marker in the southeast corner.

c. Reservation No. 270A: South of the avenue, west of 19th Street, north of T Street, NW, (1,810 square feet). This freestanding sodded triangle was added to the list of reservations in 1903, and by 1904 was roughly graded and curbed on one side. Today it is surrounded by concrete perimeter walks and flat concrete coping; it features four ornamental trees and shrub massing at each corner.

d. Reservation No. 270B: South of the avenue, north of S Street, south of Connecticut Avenue, NW. Although this concrete directional island is numbered on the NPS A map, it is not included on any jurisdictional reservation lists.

e. Reservation No. 271: South of the avenue, north of V Street, NW. Originally identified in 1887, this triangular reservation abutting City Square No. 149 was graded and sodded and enclosed with a wire fence by 1894. It is now divided into two segments by a roadway. The east portion still abuts City Square No. 149 and is sodded and surrounded by concrete perimeter walks. The southwest portion is connected to the north side of City Square No. 150 and is landscaped with flowers, shrubs and a flagstone path. It is maintained by a resident of the neighborhood.

f. Reservation No. 272: West of the avenue, east of Tenth Street, NW, (366 square feet). Initially identified in 1887, this reservation abuts City Square No. 357. In the 1920s it was enclosed with an iron fence. It is now overgrown and filled with refuse.

g. Reservation No 273: West of the avenue, southeast of Vermont Avenue, north of V Street, NW, (288 square feet). Originally identified by 1884 this reservation was transferred to the District of Columbia March 21, 1969. This freestanding, crescent-shaped reservation is now sodded and has a concrete sidewalk.

h. Reservation No. 274: South of the avenue, north of T Street, NW (251 square feet). Originally identified in 1887, this small reservation abutting City Square No. 440 was enclosed with an iron railing and planted with grass by 1894. By the 1920s the abutting square was the site of a service station; it now abuts a used-car lot. The reservation itself is difficult to distinguish from the rest of the

square. South of the reservation on the other side of the roadway, City Square No. 441 has been enlarged by a concrete plaza.

i. Reservation No. 275: South of the avenue, north of S Street, NW. Originally identified in 1887, this reservation abutting City Square No. N507 was graded, sodded, and enclosed with a fence in 1903. Transferred to the District of Columbia December 14, 1948, the sodded reservation is now the site of a post office. It is poorly maintained and features several ornamental trees.

j. Reservation No. 276: South of the avenue, north of R Street, NW, (631 square feet). Originally identified in 1887, this reservation was improved with sodding and a post-and-chain fence in 1902. Today, surrounded by brick perimeter walks, this poorly maintained sodded triangle abuts City Square No. N551 which now serves as a used car lot.

k. Reservation No. 276A: North of the avenue, west of First Street, south of R Street, NW, (8,591 square feet). Acquired as a reservation in 1917, this freestanding triangle was improved by the 1920s. Surrounded by brick and concrete perimeter walks and quarter-round coping, it has two brick interior paths and formal hedges running parallel to Florida Avenue and R Street. A concrete drinking fountain is located at the west corner and metal-frame, wood-slat benches face the interior paths.

l. Reservation No. 277: South of the avenue, north of Q Street, NW, (466 square feet). This triangle abutting City Square No. 614 was officially identified in 1887 and by 1902 was improved with a post-and-chain fence. It is now the site of a service station. It is surrounded by concrete perimeter sidewalks and sodded strips with trees. A D.C. trash receptacle stands on the south side.

m. Reservation No. 278: South of the avenue, north of P Street, NE, (563 square feet). This reservation abutting City Square No. 668 was officially identified in 1887. Since the 1920s the adjacent lot has been the site of a service station, and the reservation has been neglected. It is now surrounded by flat concrete coping and concrete perimeter walks and is entirely paved with asphalt.

n. Reservation No. 279: South of the avenue, west of Fourth Street, north of N Street, NE, (352 square feet). This freestanding sodded triangle is surrounded by concrete perimeter walks and quarter-round coping.

o. Reservation No. 280: South of the avenue, north of M Street, NE, (494 square feet). This reservation abutting City Square No. N855 was officially identified in 1887. It is now surrounded by brick perimeter walks and is sodded with several untended trees and weeds. A chain-link fence runs parallel to M Street.

p. Reservation No. 281: South of the avenue, south of West Virginia Avenue, west of Tenth, north of L Street, NE, (2,574 square feet). This freestanding triangle was officially identified in 1887. It is now surrounded by quarter-round coping, concrete perimeter walks, and sodded strips with trees.

q. Reservation No. 282: South of the avenue, west of Twelfth Street, north of K Street, NE. Originally identified in 1887, this trapezoid was transferred to the District of Columbia September 30, 1940. Formerly a trapezoid, this reservation has been divided into two pieces. The freestanding directional island to the east is entirely paved with concrete. The reservation to the west abuts City Square N980, the site of a late nineteenth-century rowhouse. It is entirely paved with brick and has a "U.S." reservation marker on the northeast side.

r. Reservation No. 282A: South of the avenue, east of Twelfth Street, north of K Street, NE, (707 square feet). Officially transferred from the D. C. April 20, 1911, this reservation was transferred again September 30, 1940 (although no record of its transfer back to the federal government has been located). Now the freestanding sodded triangle is surrounded by concrete perimeter walks.

s. Reservation No. 283: South of the avenue, north of I Street, NE, (425 square feet). This triangle abutting City Square No. N1026 was officially identified in 1887. It is now surrounded by brick and concrete perimeter walks and a path is worn through the west side. A "U.S." reservation marker is embedded in the concrete on the northeast side.

5. Front yards: Because Florida Avenue is the narrowest of the original city's avenues, there is very little space leftover within the right-of-way for privately maintained front yards. For the most part, the oldest homes on the roadway are built to the building line and have no front yards. Several rows however, have been set back from the legal building line to allow for small, enclosed yards.

C. Framing elements: Many of the houses facing onto the avenue from the south are not situated flush with the building line and create a jagged line of corners. Many buildings on the north side of the avenue are set back from the building line. As a result, the narrow right-of-way is not clearly framed.

D. Vistas: There are no significant vistas along the avenue itself, but the many intersections with other avenues afford views south into the city. For instance, the Capitol Dome can clearly be seen from the avenue at New Jersey Avenue and North Capitol Street.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues." 1872.

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U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

B. Early Views:

1927-29: Photographs were made of each reservation on the avenue during a city-wide survey. (Photographs of reservations under NPS jurisdiction are in the NPS Reservation Files; photographs of those under D.C. jurisdiction are in the HSW Reservations Collection).

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.